

# Corona Test Appointment Line: A Pressure-Cooker Project

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**I**n the world of contact centers, some commercial contact centers are almost permanently in the spotlight. Customer contact organizations with a social role, however, often remain overlooked. That is why Klantcontact.nl is launching a series of articles on “out of the ordinary contact centers.” [The coronavirus test appointment line](#) (0800-1202), an important national facility at the moment in the fight against the COVID19 pandemic, is the first contact center to be featured.

In mid-May this year, the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport approached various parties to play a role in combating the coronavirus crisis. Since large-scale testing needed to be available starting June 1, 2020, an appointment line had to be created: The National Corona Test Appointment Line. This line has a different role than the ministry’s [general coronavirus information line](#). For the appointment line, several large management and outsourcing companies were in the race. In the end, GGD GHOR Nederland (branch organization for regional public healthcare institutes) opted for Teleperformance.

## Pressure cooker

There were about ten days between the choice of Teleperformance (TP) by GGD GHOR Nederland, and the intended live date (1 June 2020). Koen Spruijt was appointed contact center manager at Teleperformance and was closely involved in this pressure-cooker project from the start. In a short period of time, a major contact center operation had to be realized from scratch.

“ [As contact center manager at Teleperformance, Koen Spruijt](#) is responsible for the operation of the national coronavirus test appointment line. For Teleperformance he has held various positions in which customer contact is central to his role. He has also been a member of the voluntary fire brigade of the South Holland South Safety Region for more than 20 years. ”

Spruijt talks about the preparations: “Estimates had been made in advance for variables such as average call time, volumes, number of people required, etc. There are parallels with the work of the fire brigade: based on the initial information you go somewhere; then, when you arrive on site you often have to adjust your plans based on new observations.

Various scenarios were also mapped out in advance – including longer call durations, higher-than-anticipated call volumes, possible technical problems and mitigating measures.”

“The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport stressed that KPI’s, such as service levels and AHT, were secondary to the goal: citizens must be able to get someone on the line quickly, and if necessary be tested quickly at a test location nearby. An important starting point is that an operational team is ready at all times, and able to deal with a possible second peak or local outbreak. The assumption was made to start large in terms of scale, and scale down later as necessary.” Belgium also applied this model: the operation was drastically reduced in the summer, from a planned 1,200 agents to a few hundred.

### **Not a standard contact center**

The need for flexibility became immediately clear on the first day the coronavirus line was open. “The [line was opened](#) on June 1 – Whit Monday, a hot summer day – and 323,000 calls were received, considerably more than we had estimated beforehand, and in unpredictable volumes.”

This led to reports in the media about start-up problems – which was to be expected given the short implementation period. But, the national coronavirus test appointment line is therefore difficult to compare with other projects implemented by Teleperformance. In other cases, much more time is available in advance for preparations, including the rollout of all kinds of best practices, whereas a preparation period of only two weeks was available for the coronavirus test appointment line project.

### **The Nature and Scale of the COVID-19 Support Operation**

- > 3,000 agents digitally selected and interviewed
- Governance structure developed for operational management and steering committees for strategic issues
- > 3,000 agents provided with the necessary hardware by delivering items to their home address
- Telephony platform set up for large call volumes
- >150 support staff trained within the support organization
- Dedicated IT helpdesk set up for home workers
- 49 trainers, trained remotely based on the train-the-trainer concept
- 200 virtual training sessions for the onboarding of staff
- Daily kick-off meeting with agents to ensure knowledge transfer
- Weekly webinar with GGD and Teleperformance with more than 1000 participants to follow trends, meet (learning) needs and ensure engagement
- Process design for outbound flow for feedback on negative test results
- Trends are analyzed on a daily basis, with the reasons why citizens contact us providing input for national policy choices

There was no time to think about office space for more than a thousand people when setting up the national appointment line – and because of the coronavirus crisis, this was not even considered as an option. In addition to opting for large-scale working from home operations, a small team also comes in to work at Teleperformance’s Tilburg location. “This enables us to keep in direct touch with what is happening with the operation – because with 99% of our people working from home, it is certainly more difficult when starting up a completely new project,” says Spruijt. “You want to be able to ask people on the front line directly what they’re coming up against, and immediately pick up signals from them. That enables you to make rapid adjustments.”

### **Everyone getting the right information**

On the other hand, making adjustments with a large group of professionals working from home also is a challenge. Spruijt gives an example: “New insights at RIVM (Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, for research in public health and coordination of the Dutch Population Screening programs) can quickly lead to policy changes that we need to implement within the operation. This has consequences for the collection of digital information that is based on A.I., but also for quality monitoring, for example. Consultations with parties in the chain are held three times a day.”

“In order to make sure the entire group of home workers quickly grasps any changes, we use different solutions. We hold a digital standup twice a day, within the micro-teams in the country. We also organize a weekly interactive webinar in co-creation with GGD GHOR Nederland, in which hundreds of people always participate interactively – there are polls and moderators from various disciplines who answer questions from agents. The questions that are asked digitally during the webinar are also analyzed: what are the questions asked most frequently by agents? These pertain to the organization of work, and to complex or special questions from citizens. The interactive webinars are rated very positively, it should be noted, with a score of nine out of ten. The interactive character and the look and feel – it’s as if you’re watching a television broadcast – in particular strike a chord with the home workers.”

“There is also a team that continuously updates the digital information collection based on all the input, and makes adjustments to the dynamic script that agents have to use. The provision of information has to be kept within strict parameters – there are clear rules about what you can say as an agent – so there is intensive cooperation with the local health authorities, also when it comes to making adjustments. Finally, there is a daily digital update, highlighting the most important changes. Everyone is aware of the possibility that the information may be different tomorrow.”

### **The client is the ‘government’, so there are specific requirements**

In other areas, Teleperformance also has had to deviate from its own widely used standard working methods. As the Citizen Service Number plays an important role in the contacts, the client does not allow screen recording, for example, for reasons of privacy. Teleperformance also has expectations regarding the agent’s home workplace.

“For example, we don’t want a conversation to be disrupted by a parcel delivery person ringing the doorbell. Teleperformance therefore expects a quiet workspace and applies a clean desk policy. We use quality monitoring to check whether matters such as identification and referral to the nearest test site are going according to the rules, so that we can get citizens tested safely and efficiently.”

### **Choice for a scalable contact center platform**

As it was immediately clear that this project was both privacy-sensitive and had to be set up almost entirely on the basis of people working from home, Teleperformance opted for a separate scalable platform. “The intended platform had to be flexible and highly secure, which is generally a tricky combination. The ability to quickly scale up, as [happened after the first day](#), was also very important. We wanted to have access to near real-time management information, and be able to adequately switch between different agent skills. For example, we started providing English-language services fairly quickly. We were also looking for a solution that was well-suited to working from home – including good sound quality and ease of access for agents – and one that would be easy to integrate with other applications.”

An example of such an integration is accessing data about the test sites. Citizens who are eligible for a test obviously want to go to the nearest test site – and be tested as soon as possible. To ensure that this all goes smoothly, the agents are provided with a Google maps application that is linked to the appointments schedule of the test locations, developed by GGD GHOR Nederland. The local health authorities can also scale up and down based on the number of test appointments generated by the coronavirus test appointment line. Based on all the desired specifications and features, Teleperformance decided on the [QuandaGo](#) platform.

### **Internal organization**

The project team set up for the national coronavirus test appointment line includes dozens of team leaders and various experienced business unit managers. Spruijt: “We expressly opted to deploy only experienced people in all the various disciplines. Because everything had to be done quickly, it was essential that everyone was able to speak the same language, and that everyone knew how to handle certain matters. Part of the team consists of professionals from, for example, Teamleiders.nu (a local HR supplier). In addition, part of the team was set up with experienced people who were already working within TP. Almost every mission critical officer within TP has, as standard, his or her own replacement lined up. This makes it easier to free up various specialists from the existing organization.”

### **Continuous learning**

The coronavirus test appointment line is different in almost every respect and this also has consequences for Spruijt, who as contact center manager benefits from his great ability to improvise, which has also served him well in his work for the fire brigade. “Of course, there are all kinds of standard processes that we use at TP – WFM, for example, that allows you to look closely at patterns. And even though we work with plans and scenarios, we must constantly respond to changing circumstances.

If route A turns out not to be workable, we have to come up with a route B quickly and creatively: we are learning continuously. On the other hand, the virus and its development are also difficult to predict.”

At the moment, Teleperformance has been up and running with the appointment line for a couple of months. “There is now a solid organization in place that can move with certain trends,” says Spruijt, who is proud to be part of this national team. “We can be a part of tackling this high-impact pandemic. That is giving me and many of my colleagues a great deal of satisfaction. It’s meaningful work, and it’s a privilege to be able to do it.”